Building Staff Communities of Practice

A community of practice (CoP) is a network of individuals with a shared interest such as a profession, hobby, or cause. At YouthBuild, staff communities of practice are small peer-to-peer professional learning groups that allow YouthBuild staff to reflect on and share best practices and design innovations in key program areas. The goal of these staff CoPs is to create an internal network of peers and experts to help deepen knowledge in a variety of topics and strategies integral to YouthBuild staff core competencies.

Staff communities of practice should be facilitated monthly by YouthBuild staff or consultants and should focus on areas that staff need to master to support program outcomes and student achievement. Approximately 8 to 15 staff should attend each staff CoP session. Groups should be small in order to support equity in sharing across program areas. Groups may meet regularly to reflect on or test new ideas and discuss research from the field.

Why CoPs are important to YouthBuild staff development

CoP participation can help staff:

- Build skills while in small groups; these skills can be connected to and reinforced by knowledge and experience gained from large group trainings

- Get introduced to new ideas that they can implement immediately

- Emerge as experts and peer coaches in certain program areas

- Increase their level of voice in professional development and program reflection

- Enhance their level of professionalism by preparing for and implementing staff-led sessions

- Find peer supports to help solve problems that prevent students from reaching goals or prescribed outcomes

Why staff CoPs are important to YouthBuild students

Students can benefit from interacting with staff involved in CoPs because these staff are:

- Poised to reflect on and change daily practice in the classroom and work site to better support student needs

- Engaged in cutting-edge practice and research in the field

- Constantly innovating ways to improve and support overall program success, particularly student growth, learning, and transition

Getting Started

Step 1: Define YouthBuild staff core competencies

Leadership should work together to define core competencies of YouthBuild program staff. Core competency categories can become staff CoP topic areas that support staff growth in key areas.

- Determine what staff need to be able to do, know, and say to be successful in moving students and the program toward success.

- Analyze current staff strengths and needs in terms of core competencies.

- Use these core competencies and the strengths and needs analysis as a basis for identifying professional development and staff CoP topics.

- Design a supervision and evaluation process that supports growth in the core competency areas for all staff.

Step 2: Develop a meaningful professional development calendar that includes staff CoPs

Plan a yearlong calendar that starts with staff mental toughness, organizes large professional development days, and includes monthly staff CoPs that support learning opportunities on staff core competencies.

- Map program needs and outcome goals. Identify the professional development and training required to support staff needs and achieve outcomes over the course of a program cycle.

- Reserve monthly or bimonthly space on the calendar for one and half hour staff CoP sessions.

- Include staff CoP topics that link learning from professional development days to give staff opportunities to discuss application successes and challenges of new skills and ideas.

Step 3: Encourage all-staff buy-in for staff CoPs

- Engage management group, then the entire staff, in readings about staff CoP and professional learning communities.

- Facilitate conversations on the potential impact of staff CoPs on the professional life of YouthBuild.

- Engage all staff in feedback on the professional development calendar and staff CoP topics for the year.

- Have staff reflect on their professional development needs and areas of expertise.

Step 4: Train staff to implement and facilitate staff CoPs

Build the staff's in-house skills, confidence, and interest to support vital staff CoPs.

- Catalogue staff professional development needs and areas of expertise.

- Map these areas of expertise to your program's staff core competencies.

- Solicit staff with areas of expertise to identify potential peer-to-peer facilitators for staff communities of practice.

- Train interested and competent staff on a variety of facilitation techniques to run engaging staff communities of practice.

Step 5: Design and support data collection on the effectiveness of staff CoPs

Develop tools to collect and determine the effectiveness of staff CoPs on staff engagement, practice, morale, and retention.

- Design and administer a staff strengths and needs assessment tool that focuses on staff core competencies.

- Design reflection activities to administer after each staff CoP.

- Ask that staff CoP leaders design methods to gauge staff implementation of new practices learned through the CoP, or changes made to existing practices as a result of CoP participation.

- Support managers in linking direct reports' participation in ongoing staff CoPs to staff professional development goals and general goal setting in the evaluation process. Assist managers and human resources staff in determining if participation in staff CoPs supports staff in achieving professional goals.

Additional resources

Read

Snyder, William M, and Eitenne C. Wenger. *Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier*, Harvard Business Review Press.

This article defines staff communities of practice and describes their purpose in organizational culture and innovation at both for- and not-for-profit entities. To download the PDF, go to www.stevens.edu/cce/NEW/PDFs/commprac.pdf

Consider

Sample staff CoP topic ideas

- Content Sharing Across the Curriculum

- Strategies for Engaging and Supporting Mentees

- Restorative Practices: Initiating Language and Conferences

- Engagement and Management in Learning Spaces

- Strategies for Incorporating Soft Skill Development and postsecondary preparation into the Curriculum

- Strategies for Engaging Alumni and Ensuring Alumni Placements

- Strategies for Incorporating Soft Skill Development in Service and Student

  Leadership

- Content Sharing Across the Curriculum

- Implementing Meaningful Writing to Learn Strategies Across the Curriculum

- Working with Special Education Students; Strategies to support emotionally disturbed Students

- Balanced Literacy: Engaging Students with High Quality Read Alouds

- How Do You Know They Really Got It? Ongoing Assessment in YouthBuild Learning Spaces

- Observing Peers to Improve Instruction and Facilitation in Everyone's Learning Spaces

- Using Graphic Organizers to Enhance Reading and Writing at Groups, Work sites, and Service Projects

YouthBuild Philadelphia Sample Staff CoP Descriptions

How Do You Know They Really Got It?

Ongoing Assessment in Groups, Classrooms, and One-on-One Interactions

This Session Will Focus on:

- Creating and integrating assessment into groups, class, one-on-one tutoring, or counseling sessions
- Using assessment to drive and determine student learning
- Including students in the assessment process

Participants Will:

- Engage in Peer-to-peer share outs on best practices
- Participate in Self-Reflection
- Begin planning for ongoing peer and whole-staff support.

Ideal For:

Those interested in looking critically at the assessments they offer and finding ways to make them more effective

Observing Peers to Improve Instruction and Facilitation in Everyone's Learning Spaces

The Session Will Focus On

- How to use observations as a tool to improve instruction
- Understanding the impact of peer observation and feedback
- Creating pre- and post-observation reflection questions that inform instruction

Participants Will:

- View several video shorts of master teachers delivering educational strategies
- Discuss video shorts
- Brainstorm
- Make commitments to observe each other over the next month in classrooms, worksites, groups or community gatherings

Ideal For:

Those interested in observation as a tool to support their peers and enhance their own instruction/facilitation in classrooms, groups, or one-on-ones.

Using Graphic Organizers to Enhance Reading and Writing at Groups, Worksites, and Service Projects

***Balanced Literacy Focused CoP

The Session Will Focus On:

- -Using graphic organizers to enhance literacy (note taking, sequencing of directions, discussion questions, comparative reading, and knowledge growth)
- Alternate teaching and lesson ideas for nontypical classrooms (work sites)
- Creating discussion questions/comments
- Project development and sharing

Participants Will:

- Discuss using graphic organizers to enhance group work
- Participate in share outs and teachable moment sharing

Ideal For:

Those interested alternate lesson ideas, use of graphic organizers, and better ways to increase student involvement in the learning process during lesson both in classrooms and onsite.